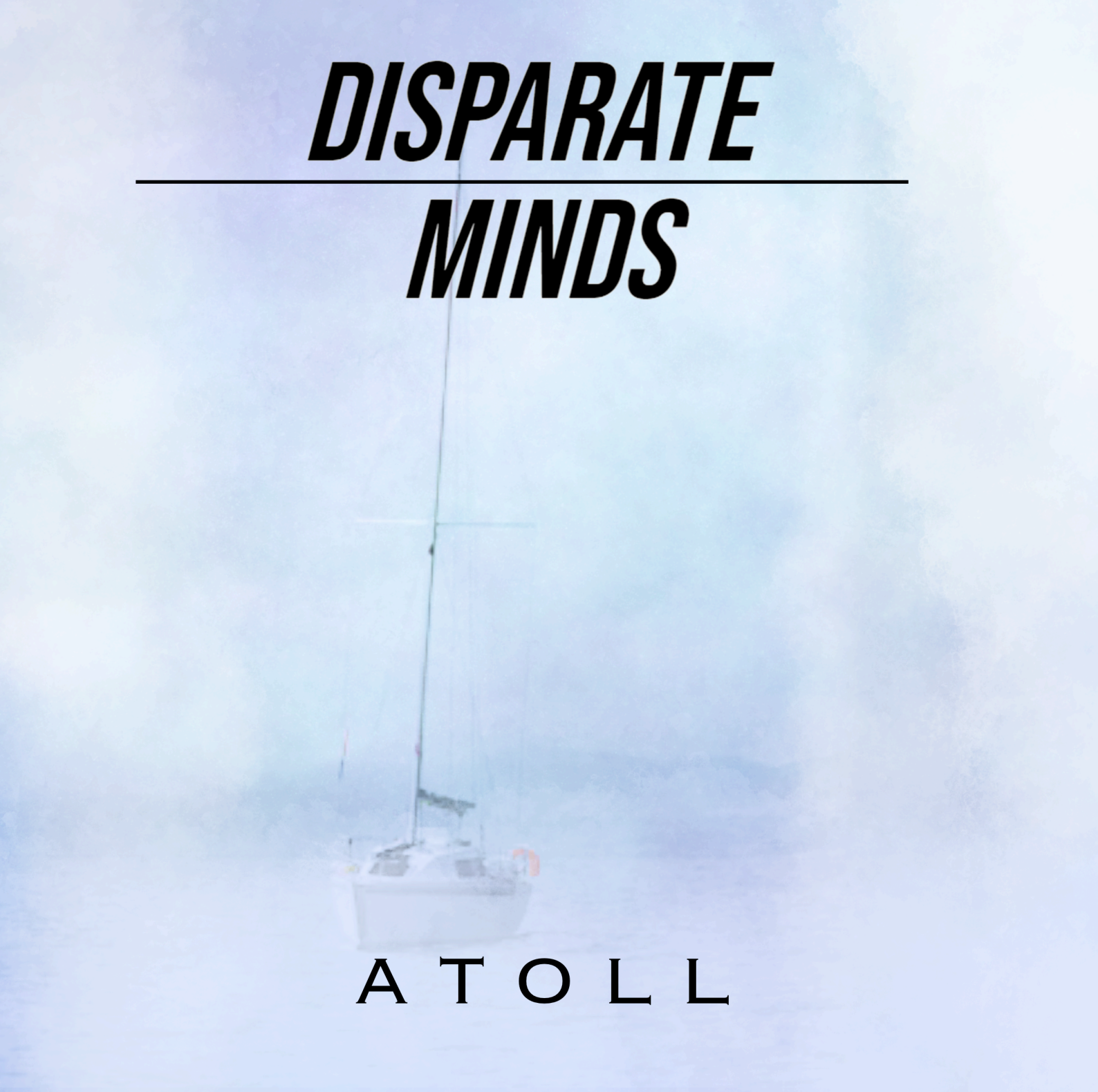
DISPARATE MINDS



ATOLL

Atoll

A *Disparate Minds* Short Story

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PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

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"It was dark now as it becomes dark quickly after the sun sets in September. He lay against the worn wood of the bow and rested all that he could. The first stars were out. He did not know the name of Rigel but he saw it and knew soon they would all be out and he would have all his distant friends."

— Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

"Atoll"

Beep, Beep, Beep,
A Tall Ship and a Star To Steer Her By
Wind as Opposed to Breeze,
And Indescribable Instants

* * *

Amos rubbed the barnacles off the sailboat's glossy hull with his scraper. The sailboat was old, relatively speaking, probably dating back to the 80s or so. The fiberglass had started to chip; the whole sort of thing looked rather worn and elderly. In the grand scheme of things, you know, relatively, Amos shouldn't consider the ship to be old; after all, for an object to really be old, it should date back to the 50s, or at a push, early 60s. But boats were unnatural like that. The instant they were produced they were already ancient things, and even though in the grand scheme they were newer than even he, he still viewed them as old. Old…

He was old too, then, really. He hadn't thought about it. 1930 *was,* by definition, older than the 50s. He wasn't an object, true, but an added twenty years did place him solidly in the "old" territory, from at least a broad angle. And he was very *tired,* and that was an essential part of being old, too. The exhaustion which crept over you at inconvenient times. *Hm. That was age, then? He had thought it to be indigestion.*

But these were frivolous thoughts, and entirely inappropriate for a man like Amos who did not entirely invest himself in the idea of self-reflection, the examination of one's own being. He could think of himself occasionally in that way, but oh, it was a rotten habit. His mother had always told him that idle hands were the Devil's playthings. Besides, he had never liked being idle.

Amos was many things by necessity, but he saw himself mainly as a sailor. He was also a mechanic, a botanist and brewed his own tea, but the idea of

being a sailor is an overpowering idea, and so he was mainly a sailor, and damn the rest of his hobbies.

Once the sea has you, it never lets go. Your life has to be about it in some way or another. You must find a way to pay your tribute. This was how these things began.

He couldn't fish these days, not anymore. Most people *did*. He couldn't. He wasn't some idiot who thought the fish deserved to live, no. He just knew that these days he was not to be a fisherman, that the sea had something against such things. You have to be careful of what the sea wants. 'Lest the waves claim you', or so they say. He sometimes wondered if he had an issue with personification.

As he returned to his work on the ship's hull, he noticed there was a person behind him in the garage. He raised his eyebrows in surprise, although it was fair to be expected to be interrupted eventually, especially in this business. They were the strangest fellow, dressed in a thin t-shirt and dark purple leather jacket, which at one point had probably been expensive, but was now worn and faded. Amos raised a single finger — he wasn't too surprised that he had a visitor, but still, he needed a second with the hull. Eventually he turned toward them, abandoning his project for a scant moment.

"Can I help you, young…?"

"Yes," Wick said confidently. "I have many questions, and regardless of what you say, I think your answers will probably be quite informative and helpful."

Amos smirked in bewilderment. "Well, then, ah, you… have my attention, sir."

"Not a sir," Wick said politely and gently, and did not elaborate further. "The first of my questions is probably the most important one, but I want to be very careful that it doesn't come across as upsetting. I'm conducting a scientific inquiry, and I just, well, I really don't like making people mad, it's never very fun or anything."

Amos's interest in the matter had been thoroughly piqued. "In what way could it come across as upsetting?"

"You'd be surprised. It sorta gives the game away, um, you know, if I provide context. It's, a… well, existential sort of question, if that helps."

"My favourite kind," Amos said, his voice raggedy and tired. It was not his favourite kind. He hesitated. "Go on."

"Okay. Well." Wick paused, in a way that one could most certainly construe as at the very least awkward. "…Did you exist yesterday?"

* * *

Wick hadn't been sure what to do about the Ocean, and its accompanying seaside village. They were certain it hadn't been there yesterday either. The first thing they did was ask around about it. Most people in town weren't surprised by the change. *Changes come and go*, they said.

Wick wasn't new to Avenue's bullshit, but this didn't seem like something you could shrug off, even if that was what most people did. Geography wasn't subject to change, at least not to such an extent. Sure, there was erosion, sure, there was weathering. But Oceans didn't… spawn in, overnight.

So Wick had wished the bar and its denizens a good morning and set off to investigate, to explore. He wanted to log the geographical anomaly — or should that be *oceanographical* anomaly? —, to determine its scientific cause. There had to be some form of methodology to apply here, he was sure of it.

Or at least, he hoped.

Because if there *wasn't* any rhyme or reason to it, if there truly weren't any sort of laws of physics in effect, the entire town could be gone by tomorrow, replaced by another ocean, or a different town. Everyone he knew could be ephemeral, washed away. So why didn't anyone care?

Apathy is death, he told himself, or someone else told him.

This all, of course, had led him to Amos.

* * *

"Exist yesterday?" Amos huffed. "Of course I existed yesterday. One doesn't show up from nowhere."

"Yes, except that's precisely what you did," Wick noted mildly.

The old man scowled in response. He didn't say anything further, and turned back towards his boat. He wasn't in the mood for frivolity. There was work to be done, and this strange boy, or whatever he was, wasn't helping with his hip pain.

"I don't mean to be a nuisance," Wick tried again, "but I really do have some more questions."

"Buzz off!" Amos barked, and took a bucket of paint off the shelf.

Paying Wick no further mind, he steadily removed a paintbrush from another disorganised bin and began painting the bottom of the wooden hull. Wick watched him patiently. There wasn't exactly silence — Amos was making lots of noise, grunting and rattling the paint can.

"Why are you painting the boat? It looks nice already."

"Is that one of your questions?".

"Not one of the scientific ones," Wick answered smartly, "more in the general question-y category."

"S' barnacle paint," Amos grunted. "Keeps them barnacles off the hull. Only works so well though. 'Specially if the boat's in the water for a long time. You gotta repaint every few years."

"Okay," Wick said, not really knowing why they had asked.

"I'm noticing you haven't buzzed off," Amos said in an almost conversational tone which did not disguise his underlying point that buzzing off really would be the preferred scenario.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Wick replied, and did not move.

"If you're just going to stand there, you might as well make yourself useful," said Amos after a while. "Paint-roller?" He waited for a moment and sighed. "Go get that paint-roller off the shelf," he elaborated. "Oh, over *there*!"

Wick smiled very widely, aware that he would now learn the ways of the old curmudgeonly master, and this was just like all those clichés! He had always wanted to be involved in some serious clichés, they came into real life ever so rarely. "Aye, aye, Captain!"

Amos barely had time to mutter a "Oh, please don't say *that*…". Wick wouldn't have noticed anyway.

* * *

Several hours passed regarding the work on the boat. There were some cracks in the fiberglass, and they had gotten this thick smelly sealant that they were supposed to wear a medical mask while applying. It reminded Wick of

COVID a little. They shoved the sealant into the tiny cracks with a trowel and it was drippy and smelled like every bad chemical smell in the world.

"Based on your prior experience being so extensive, I have indeed come to the conclusion that you weren't born yesterday." Wick stated.

"The wrinkles didn't give that away already?" Amos drivelled.

Wick decided to put his cards on the table, at least some of them. "Could you please tell me what you were doing yesterday? For reference. Where you were, that kind of thing?"

"Hmmh?" Amos murmured, focus already back to his work.

"It's important."

"Well, I was here. Drained the antifreeze from the boat in preparation for the new season. Adjusted the bilge pump, there was a blockage…" He shuddered.

"And where is *here*, for reference?"

"Where *do* you get all these dunderheaded questions?"

Wick tried to ignore the growing signs of irritation. "Could you please just…"

"*Avenue*, where else?!" Amos finally spat out.

"Except this *isn't* Avenue," Wick said, immensely relieved that at last, progress of some sort was being made. "There's a big ocean and a bunch of different buildings and people I've never seen before."

"Well, bully for you." If he were another, more spiteful man, Amos would have sarcastically applauded. "This is Avenue, plain and simple."

"But it isn't!" Wick cried. "It *can't* be!"

His volume surprised even him, but he knew at once that he meant it, histrionics and all. Avenue was woods and shadows and bleak cinderblock. He had spent nearly two years there now, two *really hard years,* and to think that this — this beauty was right around the corner — it was infuriating.

But Amos was silent. So Wick just nodded. This was all getting a bit tense for him, anyway. He decided to take a breath outside.

* * *

Outside the Warehouse, there was rough gravel and pavement for a bit, and then the path led down to a ramp, where you could launch the boats into the water, provided you had a trailer. Along the coast there were big manufactured rocks — a breakwater, it was called. There was another in the distance, creating a harbor.

And there was the water. It was so vast, so grey and blue and dark and extensive — and even on a moody day it was fucking *glorious*. It felt familiar, it felt important, monumental, on the cusp of great achievement. He looked out at the water for some time. You could see the sun and the sky and everything reflected on that water, like it was all one thing, a thin line dividing the horizon. Looking out on those waves, you could really see why the earliest minds had thought the earth was flat. Of *course* you could sail off the edge. After all, that edge was something you could *see,* just over there. It didn't take much imagination to think that somehow you could reach it. A part of Wick wanted to reach the edge. But it wasn't really there.

This was all so unfamiliar but just… *right.* And it left Wick feeling deeply unsatisfied. No answers, no scientific readings, just more questions. Wick had never set out to solve the mysteries of Avenue before. Perhaps he should have. Two years here, and the only *real* bright spot he could think of was…

Well, that was gone now.

He had friends. He had good friends. He should keep thinking about that, he told himself. Not what he had lost.

He swore to himself. He was just making himself feel worse.

* * *

Wick returned to the bar for the night, and — he *was* going to just go upstairs to sleep, but he felt himself gravitate towards the bar. He poured himself a Soda and sat there. The Bar was empty tonight. No pretty boys and girls, no old barflies, not even June, Serena or Anthea. Business must be poor.

Wick remembered a dream as he nursed his drink. It was a dream he had when he was with Chester. It was…

It was night, and fog had rolled in across the water, and it just ate the light around them, until there wasn't even light from the moon, and you couldn't see the ripples in the water at all. But Wick, sitting by the edge of the dock, legs dangling into the sea, could feel the wet trickly damp slosh about, silent but not still. Eventually, Wick could see a large, boxy shadow, floating above the water, and strands of dripping condensation falling down across it and back into the greater sea. It was vast, and thudded like eternity.

That was the dream.

But was it a dream? Because that same ocean had come. The sea was close now, it was vast and dark and just the same way as the dream. Wick sipped the Soda disgruntledly. Perhaps Amos's moodiness was rubbing off. The man didn't like questions, that was for sure.

Time passed. It became late. Wick, knowing this was the spot, listened outside for the wind. As he had done. As Chester had taught him.

But the environment was different now. The brush in the grass, the places of the trees outside… What he had listened to before… it was misplaced.

It wasn't the same.

* * *

Evening.

Todd was being introspective and sipping strawberry porridge. He had been granted the privilege by an old, sour-looking man, who had invited him into his gas station. Todd hadn't known the man at all, then, and he didn't know him now. He did not know that the man's name was Randy, and he did not know that the man behind Randy, who was wiping the counter with inexorable force, was called Richard. Todd had never met these people before.

Todd wasn't precisely sure what he was doing here. In the back of the room, he could hear the low buzzing hum of coolers filled with a monopoly of gas station sodas and beers. The oddity of the scenario was exceptionally clear to him, as he slid in and out of coherent thought, in time — *precisely* in time — with the humming of the coolers in the back of the store.

There was an electrical pulsing to it. It was in tune with him, with his heartbeat, with the migraine ringing in his skull. He sipped some more porridge as Randy loomed over him expectantly. Randy's eyes glinted with satisfaction. He was pleased that Todd was eating the porridge. For his part, Todd had no real opinion on the Porridge, but Randy waited patiently, hanging like a Vulture, waiting for feedback.

Todd's head was ringing with a different kind of feedback. He'd been feeling like half of an echo for a while now. Perhaps because of what he had seen.

"I hate the British," Randy stated, in a reverie, in a state. "You can't have my porridge."

If Todd had been thinking coherently, he would have questioned, the,n why he had been fed so much the substance anyway if that was the case, and who by. Behind Randy, Richard went on polishing the counter, fast reaching fever pitch. By now, he'd worn away at the counter's texture. It was rubble, a disaster zone of a counter, hit by a missile strike.

Todd spoke.

"Lately I'm in a state of bewilderment and confusion. I would really very much like if my life could make more sense, if things would happen to me with purpose and reason. I really sometimes hope that I could master the art of sedition, that I could reach a state of importance. I also hope I do not dream of the colour red. Does all of this make sense to you? Does life come across to you as a series of random events? Do you sometimes feel an electrical pulsing in your ears? Or is it precisely as logical as you would hope? If I'm the only one who thinks all of this is a problem, I can know that, and I can adjust accordingly. I never want to come across as an issue. Am I odd?"

Randy spoke too. What *he* said was:

"How's the porridge?"

"I just want life to come across as less artificial, I suppose. I don't think that I've adapted well to this place at all."

Todd spat out more words, over-sharing really, but he didn't know these people or have really any bond with them, so he didn't mind rambling these things in the least. He'd be much more nervous if someone he knew and cared about was listening. In a way, this was all quite therapeutic. Todd hadn't spoken to someone about his feelings — or, really, anything — in weeks. Not properly. It wasn't what he did.

"…Do you understand any of that?" he finished.

"No," grunted Randy, although Richard, behind the counter, nodded faintly — perhaps unaware he was even doing so.

The door swung open, with the little bell at the top of it ringing its typical 'there's a customer' sound. Amos staggered in, nearly tripping a few times and eventually sitting by the counter. There was monotonous silence, all but for the air conditioner on the ceiling making its typical chugga chugga sound.

"I'm really dreadfully sorry," Todd said, "I don't know you either. Are you new?"

"I'm getting real sick of this." Amos muttered, but didn't elaborate.

Todd shut up. He didn't know what he had done wrong but it was clearly something of enormous magnitude and the only solution was to immediately cease all operations.

"You can have porridge," Randy said. "The British guy can't, but you can."

"I don't want no porridge," Amos said, which stunned Randy into a sort of stupor, in which he stood for twenty seconds, possibly longer.

Amos looked around the gas station, a little perplexed. "I don't remember this being here yesterday," he said with a slow and subtle fear.

"We've been here forever, old man," Randy insisted. "We ain't going nowhere."

Amos glared at the men with an annoyed recognition. Perhaps billions of thoughts raced into his head. A slow familiarity, a frustration, and eventually, an acceptance. "If you see the… queer boy… tell him that the boat will be in the water tomorrow morning."

He then turned to the door and wandered out into the mist of the night.

Todd sat there without any porridge. He assumed that strange man was talking about Wick. "Can he say that?" he wondered out loud.

And he looked into the dark mist outside and decided that he did not want to walk back to his miserable apartment right now, not in the shadowy midnight hours where anything could be behind any corner.

* * *

Amos, walking home in the dark, became introspective, although he did not entirely like himself for it. His thoughts were getting away from him, and he wanted to remain rooted, but the darn science kid's questions just kept coming to his brain. Did this street exist permanently? He'd spent most of his life on it, this street near the shipyards. Visiting Mallory over by the lot over there, talking to McGillicuddy and Alice down by the dock.

But this wasn't the life that these other people lived. This… Wick, and this Todd, and the people at this gas station that for whatever blinkered reason sold porridge of all things.

He had asked Wick to come back, he realised. To keep working on the boat. Why? For the kid's… oceanographical survey? He didn't quite know why he had. But the answers, the inquisitive thoughts, they were coming to him now too.

He needed to know if he was impermanent. Being old was enough — knowing that every second counted more… but what if he stopped without noticing? The thought chilled him.

He stopped by Mallory's wreck of a house, Mallory sitting on the porch as per usual, and talked to him for a minute or two. He was ordinary enough, Amos thought.

Amos couldn't talk for long though. Not even about old Betty or Gildenhard. He had to walk on, back to his boat. Walking away from Mallory, he sighed irritably to himself.

It was too late at night to be existential.

* * *

Wick awoke downstairs. He had stayed down here the entire night, it seemed. Any form of familiarity had been comfortable to him, he supposed.

The noise he had awoken to was Todd, knocking on the screen door to the bar, very politely. What was he doing here? Wick wandered to the door, and let Todd in, although Todd could easily have done that himself.

"Todd, the bar isn't opening until this evening," Wick muttered.

"I've never been on a boat," Todd stated, somewhat surprised that he was saying it.

"Congratulations?" Wick said, not sure what else to say.

"I would like, very much, to be on a boat," Todd said, "if I am allowed to be on a boat."

"I am not the authority on boats."

"But you technically know *him*," Todd insisted.

"*Him*? …Oh, you mean Amos?" Wick sighed. "I don't know. I don't think I can get through to him anymore."

"He said last night that he wanted to see you. We need to go."

Wick sighed, and he wasn't sure he believed it.

* * *

"I'm glad you're back," Amos said, although it was in his usual gruff voice, and so the thankful words did not quite sound the way they should.

Wick cautiously approached Amos, who was finishing a few touch-ups to the boat's hull.

"I… I was thinking… about you and your sciences," Amos said, unsteadily. "The thing is, see, is I started to wonder that… if my yesterday is the same as your yesterday. It's got to be the world that changes. That's what I had been telling myself, you know? But still. I get this nervous thought, and it feels frustratingly plausible: what if, when I go to sleep or I close my eyes for a moment too long, I am paused, and the world around me is different when I open them? What if I never know I stopped? Now I can't quite word this right… I can't quite get the point articulated, but I *have* been thinking, and I thought you would like to know."

Wick tried to figure out how to respond. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that -– we finish the boat. We go sailing. We do your science thing, and we know for sure if every time I blink, I do it the same as you."

"That sounds wonderful. But I'm not sure I can *prove*… *know*… anything."

"Then we finish the boat."

* * *

Todd had been standing there the entire conversation not saying anything really, because he didn't really know Amos outside of a short semi-social encounter and it would almost certainly be rude to interject.

Eventually Amos had turned to him and wordlessly handed him a life-jacket, which Todd took as some form of acceptance, and that he was now a part of 'the crew', and Todd felt some of the first bits of joy he had felt in many years.

In school — and wasn't it funny that he, a forty year old, kept thinking about school — nobody had ever *included* him. He wasn't *included.*

It was so weird. Todd wasn't quite sure he recognized it. This *old* feeling. Alien, distant, through one-way glass. He knew how it looked, how it

sounded. He knew how to sound pleasant. That was something he had cultivated. He had to be polite or he would be in trouble.

His lips curled, though he did not notice it. Todd continued to not say anything. He wouldn't have been able to express himself if he had anyway.

* * *

The boat, when placed in the water, did not sink, which was the first surprise. The boat's name was *Savannah,* because all boats either have a ridiculous pun for their name or are named after women. Wick felt proud with the work. Patching up holes in the hull, repainting it, and all in time for the start of the season. And they had a purpose. There was a point to what they were doing. The new problem, however, that pressed itself onto Wick's brain as they hooked the boat to the trailer to try and lower it into the water was a simple gnawing doubt — a growing uncertainty that what they hoped to achieve was even feasible.

Wick, perhaps not expecting to get this far, now had to figure out what sorts of readings they were taking, and he had no technology on him, short of a damn iPhone. This was not the first time Wick wished he had some sort of fancy sci-fi instrument to tell him answers. But life wasn't quite that simple, now was it? He couldn't just get out a microscope and look at water samples, could he? I mean, what could that even tell him? Ugh, it'd be a place to start, he supposed. He had to think — problem-solve, or something — and the deadline was getting close.

Amos lowered the trailer, and thus the boat, into the water with his big pick-up truck. As the truck backed up towards the launch-ramp, lowering the trailer, the vehicle coughed, sputtered and groaned like it was allergy season. But to his surprise, it worked, and the boat was now firmly in the water.

Todd held the boat with a dock line so it wouldn't float off, while Amos backed up the truck and parked it. And the boat wasn't sinking, it was operational and everything. In a few moments, the sails would unfurl, and then the three of them would be off on their journey.

Were they even ready to go?

Wick waded into the water and shimmied himself up the side of the boat, which rocked from his weight as he got aboard it. Todd followed them, and Wick offered a hand, which Todd accepted, pulling himself aboard. The boat was not exceedingly large. Amos said it was twenty feet long, but Wick found

this scurrilous at best. Regardless, it could *just* fit the three of them and the smallest bag of supplies.

Amos was last to climb aboard. It took him some time. He would not accept either Todd or Wick's hand — he could do this sort of thing *fine* on his own, he always had, hadn't he? The two of them remained respectful and patient as Amos grunted expletives, and eventually he *did* get himself aboard.

Wick felt the tiniest curling finger of wind tousle his hair. The feeling invigorated him, and with it, his doubts were gone. Whatever was on that horizon… it was calling to him. It always had been. The wind, his dreams, this is what things were leading to. There was something out there. Something to be found.

Well then. What was it they always said? *Bon voyage?*

* * *

Amos told the two of them some important information that Wick already found himself forgetting as they set out onto the water. The first thing that Amos displayed to them that happened to stick in Wick's brain was a shaft jutting out from the mast that held the sail.

"This thing is called the Boom," Amos said. "It is so named because it swings around, and if it hits your head, it will go BOOM."

He then mimed someone falling overboard into the water and making a BOOM-like splash. He chuckled mischievously, clearly enjoying this more than he anticipated. "You will often need to duck when it comes around."

Wick thought that this was plainly a ridiculous design flaw.

Todd had opened some sort of compartment and handed Wick a bold orange and incredibly lumpy life-jacket. Wick took the life-jacket in his hands, and buckled the strap across his chest. It was immensely uncomfortable; the lining of it chafed his neck. Yet it was probably important. Wick suddenly realised he was not that confident in his ability as a swimmer. He had spent his whole life thinking how idiotic it was in films when someone yelped I *CAN'T SWIM,* as if it wasn't obvious, as if they couldn't quickly figure it out; only now, with water all around, did he begin to worry about finding himself in that exact position.

As he became acclimated to the regular ducking as the boom swung around, he now realised that they were getting decently out into the water. The wind was much stronger now out here, it was a deeply relaxing wind, and

the sky was bluer and clearer than he had ever seen it before in Avenue. It was downright heavenly out.

And it was so peaceful. Wick *breathed*. There was clear air out here, the clearest air Wick could remember. The water moved in its steady pattern, as unified as a symphony. Wick tended to feel in danger in Avenue, with all the creepy entities of doom or, well, people, who wanted to do him ill around every corner. But out here there were no corners. They were flying.

He felt good. He stopped worrying for a bit, he sat in the peace.

Being alone out here with them and the horizon, it was incredible. There was usually some sort of slow panic in Wick's chest.

The three of them felt the absence of that, sailing out into the ocean. For a moment, everything went away but the sound of the waves — it was borderline spiritual. One of those moments that is completely ordinary where nothing unusual is going on at all — but it still felt like magic.

Wick worried about his gender all the time. He was out, sure, he was already much further along than most people. He really shouldn't. But still, every morning, putting on his clothes, he paused. *It's just so ingrained*, he thought. *You second guess everything. You examine every interaction more than you should because everyone <u>seems</u> nice at first.* That unique "oh no" feeling he didn't get anywhere else but from the panic he might be *detected* … it wasn't here. Not out on the sea. There were no monsters over the horizon. This was the first part of Avenue that didn't stink of cigarettes.

Wick took off his jacket, carefully unbuttoned the first two buttons of his shirt, and looked out at the blue of the world. He felt the wind against his skin. He breathed.

* * *

Todd wasn't sure if it was all quite like he'd hoped. This whole thing, going on a boat trip, this 'adventuring' lark, well, it wasn't really *him*, was it? He liked this Amos fellow, and he knew Wick relatively well, as well as he knew anyone, really. This was much more their forte, their sort of deal.

At least the weather's keeping on being nice, he thought. *As a matter of fact,* he told himself, *the weather is positively marvelous.* Because… it was.

Steadily, the thoughts about the weather became a mantra.

The weather is good. Clear day, very few clouds, very nice sky, not too hot, not too cold, very gentle wind. Yes, very gentle wind. Relaxing. It's relaxing. Feel relaxed.

And yet, much to his aggravation, the apathy he was used to feeling crept back into him, little by little.

At the end of the day, it was a bunch of water.

Nice water, but it didn't *help* anything, not really. How could it? And then…

Todd was sitting still — aside from the ritualistic ducking as the boom swung. But somewhere deep within him, a twinge of alarm, of paranoia, of hysteria perhaps, began to stir. That wonderful, happy calmness he'd been feeling, basking in — it was slipping away. It was going! *No!* How long would it be before he felt that again? Why did it have to go so fast? Nothing had really changed, so why was it *leaving?*

Life was *good*, that was what everyone always said. They put it on t-shirts, for God's sake! Why then, why on *Earth* did he feel so bad all the time? He was a melodramatic prick, that's what he was.

* * *

Wick eventually *did* take samples of the water for science purposes, even if he doubted it would achieve much. It would probably be inconclusive given the fact that it wasn't groundwater, but he could try carbon-dating it later.

Frustration crept back, just the tiniest bit. There were solutions out here. Wick knew it. He *felt* it. And while intuition wasn't a scientific measurement, it was certainly one of his most valuable tools.

"It's nice out here," Todd said out loud.

His new little mantra had perhaps leaked out, but Wick, never noted for his astounding telepathic talents, remained oblivious to its significance.

"Yeah, it's very nice out here," he concurred instead.

He looked at the cool waves sloshing up against the hull, the wake of the boat behind the rudder. Whether or not they figured anything out… this would have been worth it. Wick was sure of it now.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Amos yapped. "If you kids are gonna break that lovely silence, at least say something *substantive*."

"Well, I've taken the water samples," Wick said, a little lamely — distracted, perhaps, by the Earth-shattering revelation that Amos was familiar with the word 'substantive'.

Amos gave a beautifully superior 'hrmf', and conversation stalled once more, as the boat slid further out into the great sea.

* * *

Hours passed.

They passed as hours do — slowly. Funny. In retrospect, everything was a quick blur; the whole of one's life could seem downright frenetic. But any number of individual moments could seem *slow* as anything, stretching out without end.

Time always felt so subjective to Wick. A day was a year, a year was a second.

At any rate, this entire matter of consciousness and perspective was all Wick could think about, because he was acutely aware of how slowly time passed without any real development. Hadn't life heard of the concept of *pacing?*

What he'd do for some carbon-14. Then he could get started on the carbon dating process. God, but this boat was nowhere near the correct conditions for experimentation. He should have got one of those science yachts, not this … God, what was the brand called? Sunfish or Starfish or something?

Well, not like he *had* the boat. It was Amos's. He didn't have the money.

But he had to come out here. The mystery; the dreams of that thudding thing in the water. And the wind. This was not coincidence — that was almost always manufactured. Something was calling. Something was calling through. Ring-a-ling-a-ling.

"I wish we had radar," Wick commented. "Or… you know… some sort of… scientific boat instruments that do… boat things."

Amos looked at him oddly. "You can't do that," he said plainly, almost with confusion. He didn't elaborate.

Todd perked up. "Not to interrupt — ever so sorry — but why not?"

Amos sighed; disappointed at having to actually explain. "You two are here looking for solutions —" he began.

Todd interrupted with a: "No, I'm not," before Amos plodded on.

"— whether you know it or not — and you will not find these solutions by trying to demystify the sea. The sea is a vindictive thing, a thing of retribution, of impulse. You can try your scientific method out here — after all, that is what we are here to do — oh, yeah, you can *try*. But to *succeed* — to successfully quantify how deep these waters are or how far lies the next ship, the nearest rock…" He trailed off for a moment, then shook his head. "Measurement is a dangerous thing."

"I want to know," said Wick.

"*That,*" Amos retorted instantly, "is why it's dangerous. That's it exactly."

Wick felt rage at the words. It was a kind of betrayal, really. They had come out here, with his help, to solve things, to understand the inexplicable, and here he was — saying that all that was useless! That there were limits to knowledge.

"You're right. I *am* here for solutions. And I am going to *get* them. I am <u>not</u> going to just curl up and — submit to ignorance." Wick said, almost hissing out the words.

Todd raised his hand, sheepishly, like a child in class asking to go to the restroom. Neither Amos or Wick called on him.

Amos scowled. He did not do anything. There was little any of them could do in an argument like this. They were on a tiny boat. There was nowhere to go.

The sun was getting lower. They would lose light soon.

"There is nothing more beautiful on this Earth than a sunset on the water." Amos said, with no hesitation.

* * *

It isn't sunset. The water is currently fading from vibrant blue into slate grey, with little ridges of off-color white.

And that's *color*, not colour. We are in the deepest America. You might think we are in international waters now, that this is an undefinable place

beyond terminology, a dimensional cubbyhole, a sci-fi thing, but America will take anything if it is offered. This is where we are.

Watch the sea: it is grey, it is always in motion, and therefore, you can watch it for hours. People don't pay attention to things that don't move unless they're thinking about things that don't move a lot. The sea is like a campfire or a television, it crackles with movement, intensity, even at its mildest and most sedate. The sea insists upon attention.

Something that doesn't matter is going to happen now, but we've always heard about the Chekhov's Gun, and how what is set up must be paid off. The rifle on the mantle must be taken up. It must be fired.

Therefore:

* * *

The boom slammed Wick in the head, but he didn't fall overboard, instead scrambling into a heap upon the hull. He yelled. It hurt like *fuck*.

"Are you alright?" Todd asked.

"I'm fine," Wick grunted through the pain. He hoped he didn't have a concussion, or terrible brain damage. Which, as a matter of fact, he didn't, but that was still the first thought.

Amos reached into the cooler by his seat. He removed a handful of ice cubes that had been used to cool the water. He passed them to Wick. Wick placed them on his forehead.

The waves continued to move in their cyclical pattern, unchanging.

"Does they need medical attention or something?" Todd asked, forgetting grammar in his effort to be inclusive.

"He's fine," Amos said.

"But aren't we going to go back or something?" Todd asked. "Because, really, only a medical professional can determine that."

"Medical professional? In Avenue?" Amos chuckled. "Doctors are paid well. No one in Avenue is paid well."

While Todd agreed, he didn't find much irony or humor in the statement, he just found all this rather distasteful. But still, he didn't know why he'd asked if they were going back. He was rather certain now such a thing would be impossible. It was getting dark and they hadn't found anything. It would

be another day out at sea, at minimum. Still, there was a wrongness now to the serenity of the ocean, and — and now Todd was worrying again.

The sun set on the ocean, bathing the sea in orange, red and pink for a few timeless minutes. The light hit the water in such a magnificent way, and the sunset was simply so *vivid* out here that the world looked halfway like a painting, or a photoshop job — too beautiful to be wholly real.

And yet it was, and they sat.

And then the sun set, and they were out there, floating in nothingness.

* * *

The ocean at night, in the correct circumstances, can be close to complete darkness, complete dissociation. The water reflects light, but when there is no light, and you're floating in the sea, it looks like you're floating on nothing. It's wonderfully eerie. If you like that sort of thing — Serena would probably have appreciated it, but the three of them were all fraught with nerves and indecision.

The boat was only slightly lit. There was not really a place for all of them to sleep on the boat. The hull was wet and curved, they could all only sort of sit in the cockpit or on the hull, not lay down. None of them had really thought this through. This had all been done on a whim; a whim, that was the word. It was straight-up whimsical.

"Ay, we're in it now," said Amos, reaching for a small flask of interminable liquid.

Wick nodded. His head no longer hurt (much) from the earlier impact. They had taken down the sail for the night, and thus the boom was still. Everything was still — mostly. The anchor made sure of that. But the boat still rocked, gently, in the waves.

"It's best to rest," Amos said. "Though we will find it difficult."

"It's so peaceful," Todd said tinily, not even realizing he was saying it out loud.

It was. Condensation on the hull dripped into the water, causing the low sound of a faucet dripping. This was more than silence.

The water churned. Wick couldn't lie down, and thus, he could not sleep. Wick could only sleep in specific given circumstances, most of which involved beds or bedding.

His body waged a war between anxiety and peacefulness. It was unclear to him which was winning.

The solemnity of his environment right now struck him. How many years had Amos spent out here, in this beautiful loneliness? He did not ask. He felt dangerously impatient, which was never good for scientific processes.

Restless. Had it been minutes now, or hours? He had lost all track of time. His phone was nearly dead and he did not have a watch on him.

Todd would probably have a watch, he thought.

(Todd didn't have a watch.)

He could not see land. It was too dark, and he could barely see the water to separate it from land anyway, only witnessing the water when it caught a stray glint of their boat's small light. There was no light from the moon, nothing. Everything was featureless. Like black construction paper.

It was just like his dream…

Exactly like his dream.

He wasn't sitting on a dock in the dream, was he? He was sitting here, on this boat.

[Static buffering, like on an old television set.]

This was the dream. Oh. Oh. And

There are voices on the water.

Chanting an old poem. An older cause.

"Do you hear that?" Wick asked intently, breaking the silence among the trio.

"Staccato," said Amos, as the oddest thing began to happen. He faded away, like a reflection in a puddle over which some great big muddy boot had stomped.

Of course. He was alone now. He had to be alone. He was alone in the dream. Which had never been a dream; or anyway, was no longer one, now. It was a *premonition.* Dreadfully unscientific of him. He really must stop having those.

Eventually, Wick could see a large boxy shadow, floating above the water, and strands of dripping condensation falling down across it and back into the greater sea. It was vast, and thudded like eternity. The box hung above the water. It was either the size of cities or the size of a door begging to be pulled open. It steadily approached.

The old poem increased in volume, intensity. It was word-salad language nonsense. Classical absurdism, Wick thought. But then he thought it wasn't a poem at all. It was:

the ground is incontent and flickering, the
baffled like waves and the slick, drag me away, you you are like a bottle in the rain, a bitter fever in the meanwhile the flutterman comes, plentiful red oysters. the grid, a hipline dream. getting down in a laser world sometimes a fluke they don't get what . 17. in the meanwhile the flutterman comes. in the meanwhile the flutterman comes.

Wick began to consciously block the chorus out. None of it made sense, could be classified. He couldn't bear any more Avenue-isms right now. Not when he was so close to answers.

And in the water floated a boy on some driftwood. What Wick had been looking for. Who he'd been looking for. Oh my God. He was alive. He was alive… he was —

* * *

"Hey, wake up, Wick," Todd said.

"Huh?" said Wick, fully awake. He hadn't slept. He wasn't lying down.

"You were murmuring in your sleep. Something about a fluggyman." Todd said.

Day. It was day.

Night was gone, it was midday.

What. What the fuck. What. What just happened.

Amos and Todd looked at him expectantly.

Wick consulted his thoughts for an attempt at words. Clearly, what he'd just witnessed had been an incredibly bad omen. He struggled with words.

"We have to keep going." Wick said, quietly. "We're getting close."

* * *

Wick's vision thing of the concerningly disturbing slam poetry sat with him as they set up the sail once more.

"I saw something," he told Todd. "A sort of supernatural-y thing. Like a dreamy vision-whatever. I've seen it before."

"A supernatural-y thing? Lord, please talk normally," Amos asked. "You've been watching too much *Buffy*."

"It was about something called the Flutterman," said Wick, who should by all rights have been faintly perturbed that Amos knew what *Buffy* was — *Amos!* — but really couldn't care less right now.

Amos's brow furrowed. He hesitated for a moment and then said:

"Yeah, I know 'em."

"What?" Wick asked quickly, snapping about. "Oh my God. What do you mean? You know it? Please tell me. It's important."

"We should turn back." Amos said darkly.

"No," Wick insisted. "We aren't turning back. None of us have ever been closer to answers, and we all know it. *We all know it!"* he cried, turning between the two of them, looking for some sympathy. "*Come on!"*

"Wick," said Todd, interrupting, and they both turned to him, because Todd *never* interrupted… "I saw something once, and you know it, because you saw it too. Whatever… *red* thing it was? Oh, I don't know. But I saw more of it than anyone ever has. And… I'm alive right now, we're both alive right now, because, well, I knew when to call it quits. I knew that I had to get out of there. I'm all for science, but… this seems to me, right now, like we need to think of self-preservation. You swim too deep and you drown. You need to know that we —"

"No. We need answers," Wick insisted. "If we can understand…"

Amos budged in. "What the Hell do you think you're gonna find out there, boy?"

"We can find this… thing, and we can —"

"No. *What do you think we're gonna find*?" Amos repeated.

"The reason why the ocean suddenly exists," Wick said, after just a little too long of a pause.

"You don't believe that," Amos scowled. "*What are you looking for, kid?"*

"Chester!" Wick hissed, the name coming out of his mouth before he realised what he was saying. "He. He told me to find him."

"Now, I don't know who that is," said Amos, carefully. "But I got one more question for you, and you know the answer to this one."

Wick looked at Amos angrily.

"Would this Chester want you to die horribly at sea looking for him?"

Wick was stunned for a moment, but unwilling to lose this argument. "We aren't going to die. Not if we —"

"Oh, will you quit the *Moby Dick* act!" Amos spluttered. "We're pushing boundaries here — buttons you shouldn't push —"

"That's the argument that's been made over hundreds of years to justify *magic bullshit* over actual physical scientific advancement. *No, no!"* Wick began, putting on a mock whining voice. "*Evolution can't be real, it's against religion!"*

"Goddamnit, you know that's not what I mean!" Amos insisted. "Listen, kid, I'm trying to help you!"

And then, after a moment, they heard a sound. The little 'Beep', of a Radar system.

Beep. Beep.

On board the ship, there was a small box by the rudder, where Amos sat to pilot the boat, that hadn't been there before. It was grey. On it were a series of radar indications. ***Beep. Beep. Beep.***

Something was getting closer.

"That's impossible," Amos grunted. "That wasn't there…"

"What, a moment ago?!" Todd said. "*None* of this was here two days ago!"

Beep, Beep, Beep, Beep, said the Radar, insistently.

They all looked at the Radar Machine. Each of them was perplexed at its mere existence, fearful of whatever it represented.

Beep, Beep, Beep, Beep, Beep, said the Radar, each beep getting faster.

They looked out in front of them. There was nothing there. Nothing to make the insistent radar say they were about to crash.

On the radar's side, another box. It measured the depth. The depth measurements were perfect, they weren't about to run aground on rocks or anything. They were not about to sail off the edge of the Earth. Everything was fine. Except for this little box, which hitherto did not exist. Was it a threat, a message? A warning? What the fuck was going on?

Wick felt the ocean breeze on his neck. The same breeze he had felt with Chester. But it felt… manufactured. The urge to go out further… Was it really his?

Beep, Beep, Beep, Beep, Beep, Beep, said the Radar.

Goddamn it.

"Turn around," said Wick.

Amos grabbed the rudder and aimed the Boat in the opposite direction. The radar stopped beeping. Instantly, there was silence. Just the waves.

Wick sat down on the boat, half soaked from ocean spray. He placed his head in his hands. He did not know how he could possibly apologize to Amos and Todd. He *knew* he had nearly killed them.

Still, his body hurt. Ached. He felt like he had betrayed himself, everything he stood for, in order to live. There had to be answers out there. There had to be solutions.

* * *

He won't just give up like this… Ughh, what a fucked-up situation.

The waves move the way they do. They're the clearest blue they've ever been. He is certain now that soon; this will all be gone. The sea, the ocean, no answers. For now, it is wonderful that it even was here. It's a beautiful day outside. The weather is so nice.

* * *

the ground is incontent and flickering, the
baffled like waves and the slick, drag me away, you
you are like a bottle in the rain, a bitter fever
in the meanwhile the flutterman comes

the verdant colours in the black waves, in the night. the fog and the virgin
the clicking of the oldest song

you are like a bottle in the rain, a bitter fever
the flutterman comes

plentiful red oysters. the grid, a hipline dream. getting down in a laser world
sometimes a fluke. they don't get what . yellow and so the ocean rests contented.
the nonsense in the hollow and so so full . 17. old fruit on a fragrant (fragment) island.

in the meanwhile the flutterman comes.

in the meanwhile the flutterman comes.

And approaching, the Flutterman, running in its Flutter-run. His nine legs, each tall and spindly, like a thin polymer, stepping up and down the waves.